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ABSTRACT

Divorce and remarriage may pose special problems for the grandparent-child-grandchild relationship. The kinship relationships after divorce have not been institutionalized; there are not generally accepted forms of behavior. To examine the role of grandmothers in the divorce of their children, 50 parent-grandmother pairs were interviewed. The sample came from white, middle-class families; one-half consisted of maternal grandmothers and the other half was made up of paternal grandmothers. Since one-half of the grandmothers were over age 65 and one-half were under age 65, various stages in the family cycle were represented. Kinship reorganization includes three types of relatives--blood relatives, relatives of divorce, and relatives of remarriage. The interview data identified the emergence of at least five basic types of change in the kinship system: (1) contraction with divorce; (2) replacement with remarriage; (3) retention through in-law coalition; (4) expansion by divorce and remarriage of multiple children; and (5) two-generation divorce and remarriage chains. The data indicated that paternal grandmothers were more likely to maintain relationships with former daughters-in-law than were maternal grandmothers with former sons-in-law. Grandmothers with expanding kinship systems reported having more permissive and flexible values on divorce. The findings showed that expanding kinship systems did not result in more sound support, but rather in a loosely-knit network. The relationships will continue to be followed. (ABL)

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Marital Instability and the Changing Kinship Networks of Grandparents

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Abstract

The findings reported here focus on the effects the divorces of children have on the kinship networks of the older generation. In a sample of white, middle-class families, it was found that three years after a child's divorce, 47% of the kinship networks of the grandparents had expanded. A common source of expansion was among paternal grandmothers who retained relationships with former daughters-in-law and her relatives at the same time they added new relatives with sons' remarriages.

Marital Instability and the Changing Kinship Networks of Grandparents

" There is no chart in heaven showing which pew is to be occupied grandparents and which by stepgrandparents." Ann Landers

The high incidence of divorce and remarriage has resulted in marked changes in the American family. Much research has been conducted on the adaptation of divorced individuals and their children. Despite widespread attention in the mass media, however, only rarely are the processes of kinship reorganization studied, particularly as they affect the status of the grandparents and ultimately the family status of older people (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984). Given the fact that approximately half of all marriages will be affected by divorce and that 80% of the divorced individuals remarry, these changes in kinship relations may have a widespread effect (Weed, 1980). Our purpose here is to report research findings which illustrate how these organizational changes in American kinship change the kinship networks of the grandparent generation.

Background

There is general agreement among anthropologists on three major dimensions of American kinship of the nonethnic middle class (Schneider, 1968; Schneider and Homans, 1953) . First, kinship relationships are regulated by the voluntaristic or optional principle, meaning that personal preferences and mutual interests determine interaction rather than rules specifying one's rights and obligations.

Second, the kinship structure is comprised of two major

units, the nuclear family and an amorphous group called kindred. Normatively, an individual's first priority goes to the nuclear family which is a private residential unit structurally and economically separated from the kinship unit. The marital dyad is the basis of the household and is generally the most significant family relationship in our society, a situation which makes divorce a particular problem. The family is vulnerable, because one of only two adults leaves the household. While there is a diffuse emotional commitment between parents and adult children, the privacy of the nuclear unit results in the structural isolation of the older generation (Parsons, 1949).

Third, the kinship system is bilateral, although in reality there is a matrilateral focus because of the female-centered basis for activities (Troll, 1971; Yanigasako, 1977). Most individuals also report that they are closer to their mother's relatives. Women have been described as the "kinkeepers" who are the primary catalysts for interaction.

Divorce and remarriage processes are not fully institutionalized in our society, a situation which complicates the study of kinship relations of the grandparents during this period (Cherlin, 1978; Johnson, 1983; Johnson, 1985). There are few rules on which relatives are to be included after marital changes and which are to be excluded. In fact, there are no structural imperatives that parents or other relatives have to come to the assistance of divorced kin. According to William Goode (1956), with the weakening of moral sanctions against divorce, our kinship system permits divorce, but it has not

provided for its consequences. In most situations, parents have difficulty incorporating adult and formerly married children back into the family. Divorce then creates a "social limbo" in which there are opportunities for diverse kinship alternatives.

Given the problems found in the post-divorce family with dependent children, the grandparents are the logical relatives to bolster its depleted resources. Their status, however, is ambiguous in the American kinship system. It is a derived one, for their actions are constrained by the parents who mediate between them and their grandchildren (Johnson, 1983; 1985). Only one of the parents is a blood relative, and with divorce, the other parent of the grandchildren might no longer be considered a relative. These dilemmas of grandmothers are illustrated by the legal debates on the rights of grandparents with the divorce or death of a child (Wilson and DeShane, 1982).

It is possible as Frank Furstenberg (1981) points out, that the inherent elasticity and flexibility in the kinship system can result in positive benefits during periods of marital instability. Multiple marriages enlarge the pool of potential relatives. Since there are no rules of closure in defining the boundaries of the kinship system, there are opportunities for diverse alternatives. It is also possible that the grandchildren are a form of social property which is of higher value during an period of low birthrates; the diminishing pool of grandchildren can be redistributed among a larger pool of grandparents.

Sample and Methods

This report stems from a research project on the role of

grandmothers in the divorces of their children. In this study, 50 parent-grandmother dyads were interviewed as well as additional individuals along the divorce and remarriage chains. The majority of the families were selected from public divorce records of middle-class suburbs. The divorcing offspring was contacted first and a request was made to provide access to his or her mother. Opportunity sampling added a smaller group of grandmothers who in turn referred us to their divorcing child. In addition, ten grandmothers have been interviewed who specifically requested that we not interview their child. With these exceptions, participation rested on agreement of both generations and consequently represents a sample in which the generational tie was maintained amicably.

In order to control for expected variation by social class and ethnicity, the sample is confined to middle-class, white families. Approximately half of the grandmothers are maternal and half are paternal. A similar division is made by age with half of the grandmothers under 65 years, and half, 65 and older. Thus, the stages in the family cycle of their children also vary. The interviews were conducted less than three years after their children's separation. By design, all grandmothers had divorcing offspring residing in the area, but in a few cases, the grandchildren moved away in the course of the research. The custody arrangements were: maternal, 49%; paternal, 7%; joint, 20%;and undecided or mature children, 24%. With the exception of objective measures of social contact and aid, interviews were open-ended and desig to gather ethnographic data. From an analysis of the first interviews, kinship chart was constructed which included all relatives of divorce an

remarriage which the grandparent could potentially form.

Patterns of Kinship Reorganization

In the following analysis three types of relatives are described--the consanguineal or blood relatives, the relatives of divorce, and the relatives of remarriage. In addition to consanguineal relatives, there are two groups of potential affinal relatives. The relatives of divorce include former children-in-law, their parents and children, and even their new spouses and their relatives. With the remarriage of children, the potential relatives of remarriage include new children-in-law, their parents and children and even their former spouse and their relatives.

It is useful to think of these relatives as occuppying positions along divorce and remarriage chains which are of three generations depth, the grandparents, their divorcing children, and their children. For the grandparent generation, expanding kinship relationships came from four sources: 1) when relationships with relatives of a child's divorce were retained, while new relatives were added with a child's remarriage; 2) when the divorces and remarriages of multiple children created several subsets of relatives; 3) when the divorces and remarriages of the grandparents added another set of step and in-law relations; and 4) when they retained relationships with former children-in-law after they remarried.

By these criteria, 47% of the grandmothers had kinship extensions through marital changes three years or less after their child's marital separaration. Of the remainder with the consan-

guineal linkage between generations and few ties to relatives of divorce, there had been seven remarriages already, so the possibility of kinship extensions also exists here. In fact, the situation is a dynamic one for all families, since further marriages and divorces initiate additional formations and breakdowns of affinal relationships.

Usually the grandmothers are linked to these in-law relationships through their grandchildren, who, of course, retain biological ties in the families of remarriage of both parents. As grandchildren retain and accumulate relationships, there is a cumulative effect on those grandparents who maintain close ties with their grandchildren. These grandparents can form relationships with their grandchildren's new stepparent and stepsiblings and in some cases their step grandparents. It is also possible that relationships form with a grandchild's new stepparent's former spouse, the parent of her grandchild's stepsiblings, because of the linkage between stepsiblings.

The situation is a dynamic one for these families, for in the 50 kinship systems after the first contact, there are a total of 74 divorces at the second generation or the parent level and 20 remarriages. At least five have formed nonmarital households. The majority of these new partners had also been divorced and many had children, who could provide the linkage to their other parent and the relatives of divorce. Among the 60 women interviewed, 10 have been divorced, while after divorce and widowhood, seven are in their second marriage and two are in their third marriage. Obviously in these unions, they also have acquired new step-children and step-grandchildren. Also 35% have

more than one divorced child, so the complex array of kin relationships were potentially even more far reaching.

In determining the characteristics of the expanding kinship system, several factors emerge. First, the expanding systems are much more common among paternal grandmothers. They are far more likely to retain relationships with former daughters-in-law than are maternal grandmothers with former sons-in-law. For example, 36% maintain at least weekly contact with former daughters-in-law, while only 9% of the maternal grandmothers have weekly or more contact with former sons-in-law.

Second, these grandmothers in the expanding system generally have more permissive and flexible values on divorce. In response to projective stories probing values on cohabitation, divorce and personal freedom versus family responsibilities, significantly more of the grandmothers with expanding kinship systems were less disapproving of the new life styles among their divorcing children than were the grandmothers in contracting systems (Johnson, 1985).

Third, the grandmothers in the expanding kinship system generally are more satisfied with their relationships with their children and grandchildren and the amount of help they are extending to them with the divorce. Nevertheless, in comparison to the grandmothers in the contracting systems, there is less aid exchanged beween parents and divorcing children. The grandmothers were less likely to report they increased their support to a divorcing child nor were they likely to say they would call upon a child if they were in need of help. These

findings suggest that relationships in expanding systems might be more specialized in expressive functions; thus, they are possibly more rewarding although less likely to provide social supports.

Fourth, the grandmothers in expanding kinship systems were more likely to be unmarried. Those grandmothers who were themselves divorced or widowed were significantly more likely to gain rather than lose relatives after a child'd divorce.

The Processes of Kinship Reorganization

Interviews with the grandparents and their divorcing children have identified the emergence of at least five basic types of change in the kinship systems. In the kinship figures, the follow symbols are: Δ, Male; O, female, =, marriage; $\not$, divorced; $\sim$ cohabitation.

1. Contraction with Divorce--The Jones

The predictable kinship reorganization following divorce has a consanguineal emphasis. This pattern was found in 40% of the families at the time of the first inteview. For example, the Jones have a divorced daughter. After the divorce, they severed the relationship with their former son-in-law and his parents except when specific occasions demanded that they meet (for example, the high school graduation of a grandchild). Their contacts with their former son-in-law's parents were confined to these special occasions and the exchange of Christmas cards. No holidays or children's birthdays were celebrated together. On occasion, they met their former son-in-law when he stopped by to pick up the grandchildren. The relationship was formal and distant with each side attempting to avoid conflict. In families such as these, the in-laws are no longer considered relatives following divorce nor are they considered friends. They are

usually referred to as "My grandchild's parent or grandparent."

2. Replacement with Remarriage--The Browns

The Browns illustrate a common pattern of reorganization where the former in-laws of a child's divorce are replaced with new in-laws of his or her remarriage. Such a process will continually occur as new remarriages take place. In such families, the grandparents cease contact with the former son-in-law and his parents and form relationships with a new son-in-law, his parents and often children by his previous marriage.

The grandparents also usually need to take steps to exclude former children-in-law and transfer their loyalties, if they are to form a conflict-free relationship with their child's new spouse. In some cases, such an exclusion ends a close, interdependent relationship between a grandmother and her former daughter-in-law. One grandmother only took this step to reduce conflict with her son only after he insisted that she cease contact with his former wife.

3. Retention through In-law Coalitions--The Smiths

(Figure 1 here)

The third pattern, found in one-fifth of the families, is particularly common among paternal grandmothers. For example, the Smiths, paternal grandparents, formed a coalition with their former daughter-in-law which preserved the bond with their grandchild. Their own son, who had remarried, was excluded from this three-generational unit of solidarity, although his relationship with his parents continued. He merely was unable to provide a linkage between his parents and his children. Such an

event usually takes place when a divorced father abdicates his paternal role. In order to avoid the loss of the grandchildren and to compensate for a son's deficiencies, the grandparents are free by the rules of the system to form a parent-like relationship with their former daughter-in-law (Figure 1).

From the grandchildren's perspective, they also have a reconstituted kinship system comprised of their father, his new wife and her children by a former marriage. However, it is logical to assume that this new unit is less stable than the three generation unit, because their loyalties to their mother are reinforced by their father's parents. Where money is given by the grandparents to grandchildren, these resources are transmitted through an affinal rather than consanguineal relative, a factor which further strengthens the in-law coalition.

It should be noted that in some families, both sets of grandparents formed coalitions with custodial parent and worked together to support the grandchildren. From the point of view of a grandchild, the advantages of this arrangement are apparent, for the effects of divorce and the loss of a parent are moderated by the solidarity of grandparents. Such a situation also illustrates how the grandchildren represent a highly valued form of social property which is shared by a pool of grandparents.

4. Expansion by Divorce and Remarriage of Multiple Children

(Figure 1 here)

Figure 1 represents an kinship system which has expanded because of the divorces and remarriages of multiple children.

With the divorce of both a son and daughter, a widowed grandmother actively maintains a unit of solidarity with her former daughter-in-law who now lives with her former son-in-law. Because both grandchildren of divorce are now in the same household, this affinal linkage is strengthened. The mothers of both of her former children-in-law are also included in exchanges of sociability and reciprocity.

She views this kinship unit as her most important one, although she also has secondary unit comprised of her son and his reconstituted family, his wife , her parents and her child by a former marriage. Her divorced daughter has had two previous marriages in which step-children were present. Since these children are in the vicinity, she also has some contact with them and most significantly, both her consanguineal and step-grandchildren call her by the same term, "Nannie." A new grandchild is expected in the union of her former children-in-law who will have a nebulous relationship to Mrs. Vaughn. Nevertheless, the birth of the child will increase this third generation pool.

5. Two-Generation Divorce and Remarriage Chains

(Figure 3 here)

The Fergusons illustrate the most expansive kinship system found to date, although conceivably more will be added with additional divorces and remarriages. The system has expanded at two levels through the divorces and remarriages of both the grandparents and their son. With their remarriages, both grandparents have added step-children and step-grandchildren within two years of their son's divorce. Their son remarried

and moved outside the area, while their former daughter-in-law remarried and settled within a short car ride of both of their residences. They and their new spouses maintain friendly relations with her and her new spouse.

Both the paternal grandmother and the paternal grandfather's new wife babysit for the grandchildren and both help financially with occasional gifts of money. The grandparents are also acquainted with their former daughter-in-law's new husband, his former spouse and their children through their linkage with their grandchildren. Since the children of divorce and remarriage live within a few blocks of each other, contact is frequent. Both grandparents also have their new step children and grandchildren in addition to a busy life with friends, so their time and energy is diffused over several social groupings. Both are healthy and active, but if they should become impaired, it is uncertain how supportive such a kinship network would be.

Conclusions

In conclusion, one of the most interesting patterns found in these emerging kinship forms is the expansive tendencies found among paternal grandmothers. As noted above, with female-centered kinship networks, there is matrilateral bias within the American bilateral system. Usually with women as the kinkeepers, the relationship between mothers and daughters is expected to be stronger and more continuous after a daughter's marriage than those between mothers and sons since mothers and sons are less likely to share domestic and family activities.

This relationship transcends the divorce-related pressures

for dissolution most likely because the childrearing functions performed by women are essential for generational continuity. In later life, caregiving is usually provided by women, activities which also retain intergenerational relationships (Brody, 1979; Johnson, 1983; Johnson and Catalano, 1983). It appears that this pattern persists even with androgenous households where males also perform many domestic function. Where family functioning is threatened with the common stresses imposed by divorce, other adults are essential. The fact that the support can come from mothers of sons instead of or in addition to the sons, the fathers of the children of divorce, indicates the pervasiveness of the female linkage. Where necessary, former affinal bonds are emphasized, often at the expense of consanguineal parent-child bonds. Such an outcome often has a stabilizing effect for grandchildren in the post- divorce family.

Second, cultural factors are important determinants of these kinship networks (Bengston, 1985). Under certain circumstances the optional character of kinship relationships creates an expanded system for the grandparents and, in the process, enhances their social integration. Undoubtedly such factors such as affection and mutual interests contribute to satisfactory and enduring in-law relationships, but these relationships also rest on congruence in values. Those grandparents, who were more flexible in their values and permissive in regard to their children's and grandchildren's life style, were more likely to have expanded systems. Usually they took great pains to avoid being judgmental or interfering in their children's lives.

Three, the findings do suggest that the expanding kinship systems are specialized in expressive functions. These relationships may be more rewarding but less supportive than those in which consanguineal relationships predominate. Given the voluntaristic principle which regulates these relationships, one can assume that the potential for conflict is reduced. In the absence of the norm of obligation, however, the social support potentials may be low.

These findings describe white, middle-class suburban families where at least one grandmother lives in proximity and where the divorce is relatively recent. Thus one must be cautious about generalizing the findings on kinship expansion to a wider population. It is tempting to bestow a false concreteness to these relationships, when we know little about how stable they are over time. At the present time we are reinterviewing respondents in both generations in order to follow the course these relationships take. In the meantime, we can assume that the processes of reorganization described here reflect a loosely structured kinship system of wideapread occurence in our society, which is predictive of the processes of reorganization found also in other sub-groups with similar kinships systems.

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Figure 1

Retention with In-Law Coalition

The Smiths

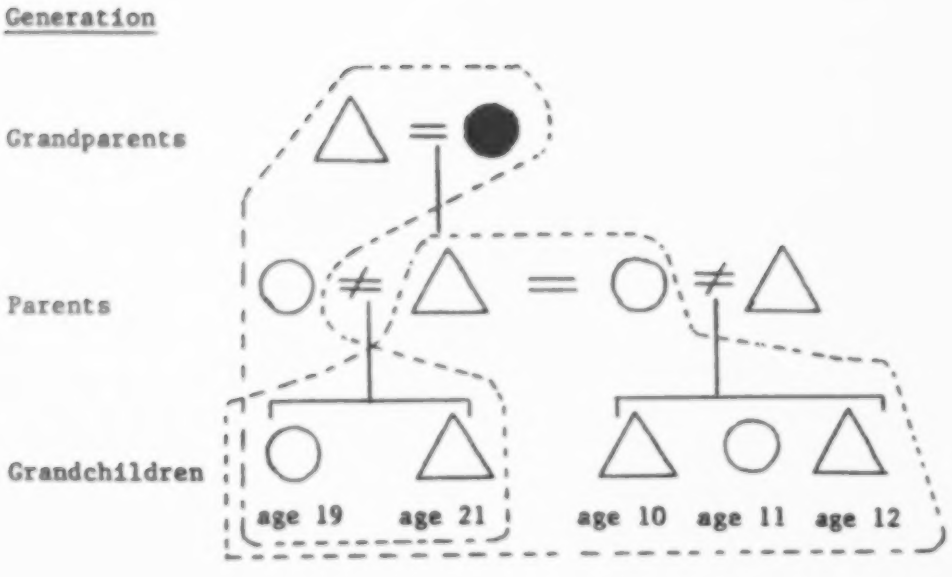

Figure 2

Expansion by Divorce and Remarriage
of Multiple Children
The Vaughns

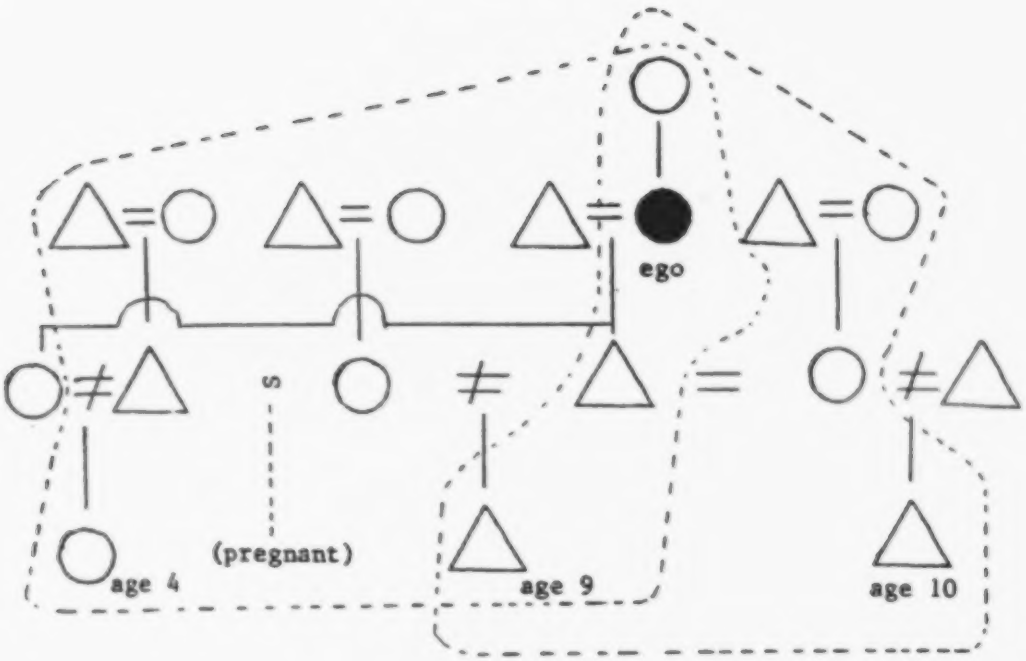

Figure 3

Two-Generation Divorce and Remarriage Chains

The Fergusons